

EXPLORING MIDDLE LEVEL ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS' PARTICIPATION IN LITERATURE CIRCLE DISCUSSIONS: A CASE STUDY

By

XIUFANG CHEN*

** Assistant Professor of Reading, Rowan University, Department of Reading, College of Education
Rowan University, Glassboro.*

ABSTRACT

Implementing a qualitative case study, the researcher explored how a sixth-grade English language learner participated in literature discussions of various groupings in a classroom setting, and how she perceived these interactions about reading and text in the process of learning to read. The participant was struggling with reading in a sixth-grade classroom at a US urban Christian school. This study's data set included detailed field notes from the reading sessions in the classroom throughout a semester, transcripts of a three-tier series of interviews with the participant, and various documents including the participant's portfolios.

The findings from this research study indicated that the participant did not have many social interactions associated with reading and text in her previous school learning experiences. Among the different types of social interactions in class, homogeneous grouping mostly encouraged her participation in discussion, and Literature Circles proved to be a very effective teaching approach for her. The social interactions about reading and text in class helped the participant better understand and remember the text. They also impacted her experiences with reading, more specifically, her view of reading, the frequency and breadth of her reading, her views of self as reader, and her reading process.

Key Words: *Literature Circles, English language learners, Middle Level, Case Study.*

INTRODUCTION

Since reading is widely recognized as essential to education and is a foundation of lifelong learning, researchers and educators have always attended to the issue of struggling readers including English language learners (ELLs). Most of researchers and educators' attention in the past, however, has been given to K-3 students (Vacca & Vacco, 1999), even so students beyond grade three face more complex challenges (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). English language learners (ELLs) at the middle level (grades 4-8) need to comprehend a variety of texts in different content areas while still learning the language. When ELLs need help in reading, researchers have found that social interactions can play a critical role in the process (Gombrell, Mazzone & Almasi, 2000; Guthrie, 1996). Social interactions help readers to develop literacy skills and promote higher level thinking skills and the intrinsic desire to read and write (Gombrell,

Mazzone & Almasi, 2000).

In Literature Circles, "readers bring their "rough draft" understandings about the book to a discussion and think collaboratively with other readers to create new and more complex understandings...the dialogue in these circles leads to new perspectives on literature, life, and literacy" (Short, Harste & Burke, 1996, p.480). Literature Circles thus support readers in thinking critically about books and reading as a transaction (Rosenblatt, 1978), a process in which readers actively construct meaning from a text by bringing meaning to as well as taking meaning from a text (Short, Harste & Burke, 1996). While language ability level might play a role in Literature Circle discussions, students from different cultural backgrounds act differently in social situations (Jordan, 1995). These differences should be examined. As classrooms become more and more culturally diverse, it becomes increasingly important to the understand techniques that will facilitate the learning of

students from different cultural backgrounds, especially those who are still learning the English language.

The purpose of this study was to explore the social aspect of reading in literature circles (Daniels, 2002) in relation to middle level English language learners. More specifically, this study set out to investigate how a sixth-grade English language learner participated in literature discussions of various groupings in a classroom setting, and how she perceived these interactions about reading and text in the process of learning to read.

Two questions guided this study:

1. What social interactions associated with reading and text occur at school to a middle level English language learner, and how can these interactions be described?
2. How does the participant perceive the Literature Circle discussions in her classroom reading experiences?

Background

As a part of a comprehensive and balanced literacy program, literature circles afford students rich opportunities to use many skills they learn in other areas of the program such as reading aloud, oral language, making connections, critical thinking and the like (Daniels, 2002; Hill, Schlick Nae, & King, 2003; Schlick Nae & Johnson, 1999; Short & Klassen, 1993). In literature circles, often, small groups of students gather together to discuss a piece of literature in depth, usually covering events and characters in the book, the author's craft, or personal experiences related to the story. The discussion is guided by students' response to what they have read. Literature circles enable students to engage in critical thinking and reflection as they read, discuss, and respond to books. With their collaborative and dialogic nature, literature circles allow students to develop their understanding as they construct meaning with other readers in a non-threatening, community-like setting (Schlick Nae & Johnson, 1999; Short & Klassen, 1993). Literature circles finally guide students to deeper understanding of what they read through structured discussion and extended written and artistic response (Johnson, 1997).

Some versions of literature circles use discussion roles that rotate each session (Daniels, 1994/2002). Students come

to the discussion with role sheets to help them to perform a specific role, such as summarizer, connector, recorder and vocabulary enricher. Roles are designed to support collaborative learning by giving students clearly defined, interlocking, and open-ended tasks (Daniels, 2002). Role sheets are designed to help each student to approach a text with clear and conscious purposes (Daniels, 2002). Their goal is to ensure chunks of class time to be comfortably reallocated to genuine student-led, small-group discussions. Once students can successfully conduct their own discussions, formal roles during discussion may be dropped. More guidance in methods for recording responses to the reading is needed when students feel encumbered by the lengthy role sheets (Carrison & Ernst-Slavitt, 2005).

Literature circles are student and reader response centered reading activity (Schlick Nae and Johnson, 1999). They are structured for student independence, responsibility, and ownership. Literature circle groups are formed by book choice. Hill, Schlick Nae, and King (2003) found that groups of four to five students work the best in literature circles since "larger groups tend to break off into side conversations and groups with only three students don't seem to have enough energy or diversity of ideas" (p.12).

Literature circles, with the variety of perspectives and responses, provide struggling readers and ELLs with many different models for sharing, talking about, and interpreting literature (Martinez, 2000; Short & Klassen, 1993). This approach encourages students to engage in reading the text first and then be active participant in the group discussions and extension projects. They have to take responsibility and collaborate with each other. During this process, students develop more complex levels of thought, language, and literacy. Krashen (1993) stated that when learners feel they are members of a group or club, much learning occurs effortlessly, and this kind of learning results in a lower affective filter that leads to more language learning. Similarly, Perego and Bayle (2000) stated that informal groups help ELLs to become familiar with discussing literature by observing and learning from their American peers during the meaning negotiation

process. Besides, real authentic use of language allows ELLs to foster stronger literacy skills. The results of studies on Literature Circles evidenced increased student enjoyment of and engagement in reading, self-esteem, social outlets for student, multicultural awareness, gender equity, and promoted perspectives on social issues (Evans, Alverman, & Anders, 1998; Johnson, 2000; Macgillivray, 1995).

No matter how valuable Literature Circles have been proved in helping students learn to read, such experiences are still quite rare in classrooms (Allington, 2002; Short, 1992). Commeyras and Sumner (1998) found in their survey of literacy professionals that ninety-five percent of literacy professionals believe that peer discussion offers students critical ways to learn about literature and most (seventy-seven percent) are interested in using it in their classrooms. However, only thirty-three percent of them actually use peer discussion frequently in their classrooms. Almasi, O'Flahavan, and Arya (2001) reviewed some of the reasons for this lack of implementation: peer discussion requires that teachers release some control within the classroom (Cazden, 1986); many students do not function well within peer discussions perhaps due to power, race, or gender (Alvermann, 1996); the lengthy nurturing period may cause many teachers to abandon the practice before it reaps any benefits (Roller & Beed, 1994).

Allington (2002) stated that perhaps we need to blame standardized testing or the powerful "grammar of schooling" logic. "Little has changed in the way schools divide time and space, classify students, allocate them to classrooms, splinter knowledge into "subjects," and award grades and "credits" as evidence of learning" (p.85). Traditionally, responding to post-reading questions has typically driven school-aged children to read in school. Teacher training courses and curriculum materials pay more attention to questioning than fostering classroom discussions.

Theoretical Framework

This study was grounded in Vygotsky's social constructivist theories (1978, 1986), especially those pertaining to

literacy. The major theme of Vygotsky's theoretical framework is that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition. Specifically, this study was based on the three principles of Vygotsky's theories and grounded in work by other researchers who have also addressed the importance of social interactions in literacy learning (Dixon-Krauss, 1996; Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000; Wink & Putney, 2002).

These principles are:

1. Human action is mediated by signs and tools primarily psychological tools such as language.
2. Learning and development are social, cultural, and historical by nature.
3. Learning is facilitated through the assistance of more knowledgeable members of the community and culture in the zone of proximal development.

The Study

Informed by the review of related literature and based on the nature of the research questions, a qualitative case study was implemented. "Qualitative studies are best at contributing to a greater understanding of perceptions, attitudes, and processes." (Glesne, 1999, p.24) Case study methodology "involve(s) systematically gathering enough information about a particular person, social setting, event, or group to permit the researcher to effectively understand how it operates or functions" (Berg, 2001, p. 225). A case study presents insights into real-life situations that "can be constructed as tentative hypothesis that help structure future research" (Merriam, 1998, p. 41). The understandings gained from case studies can not only affect but also improve practice, which is one of the final goals of this study. Merriam (1998) defined the qualitative case studies as being particularistic (focusing on a particular situation/phenomena and taking a holistic view of the situation), descriptive (providing rich, complete, and literal description of the incident being investigated), and heuristic (illuminating readers' understanding of a particular phenomenon by bringing new meanings, extending readers' experiences, or confirming what is known).

"Qualitative researchers neither work (usually) with

populations large enough to make random sampling meaningful, nor is their purpose to produce generalizations". (Glesne, 1999, p. 29) The participant (pseudonym is used below) in this study, Sujin, was an English language learner who was struggling with reading (according to their teachers and grading procedures) in a sixth-grade classroom at an urban Christian school. She was a very quiet Korean girl at the age of eleven. She started to learn to read in English three years before and came to the U.S. one year before this study. She lived with her aunt and two cousins. At home, she spoke Korean with her aunt and English with her cousins, while at school English was the only language she could use.

Sujin's school is located in a mid-sized city with the population of over 200,000 on the plains of the Southwestern United States. An extensive hospital, a large state supported university and two small private universities diversified the population with different ethnic and racial backgrounds. The overwhelming majority of persons were however white native English speakers. The school offers programs in Pre-K through grade twelve, with about thirty students in each grade. Around 10% of students were of color. Students ranked among the top 17% in the nation on the Standardized Achievement Test they used.

The school had two sixth-grade classes and seventeen students were in Sujin's class. Most children had been together in a class since Pre-K. In Sujin's class, there were eight boys and nine girls, one African American boy, one Indian American boy, one Mexican American girl, one Korean girl, one Indian American girl, and all others European Americans. Sujin's reading class was from 3:10-3:50 pm every day. Her teacher, Ms. Johnson, had taught from Kindergarten to sixth grade for nine years at the school. She had a music background and got her Master's degree in Language Literacy Education. She taught English/language arts/reading to the sixth grade.

At the beginning of the study, Ms. Johnson was observed reading aloud the book *The Prince and the Pauper* (Twain, 1881/2000) to the class. She chose to read aloud the book because only five to six students in the class could read it independently, and the book was required in the

Core Knowledge curriculum. Every day at the beginning of the reading session, Ms. Johnson read aloud the book for about fifteen minutes. When she was reading, Ms. Johnson frequently stopped to ask comprehension questions or answer students' questions, which were turned into whole class discussions. Ms. Johnson used this whole class activity to model how to read, comprehend and talk about books, which prepared students for their small group discussions.

After the reading aloud, five to six students with different reading ability levels were grouped together discussing the part of *The Prince and the Pauper* they read. In these heterogeneous groups, there was a volunteer leader in each group organizing their discussions, which were mainly based on the response questions the teacher gave them. Ms. Johnson hoped that the response questions could stimulate discussions. Sometimes they also asked and talked about their own questions out of their interests. Noticing some groups simply took turns answering the questions she gave them, Ms. Johnson taught a mini-lesson on book discussions with ideas or opinions from students. Discussing the read-aloud book in heterogeneous small groups, students were prepared for the literature circle discussions they never tried before. The author observed and tape-recorded the group discussions involving Sujin.

After finishing *The Prince and the Pauper*, Ms. Johnson started literature circles. First, she brought students sets of books and book talked every book. After that, she asked the students to browse and decide the books they wanted to read. Students were then required to write down on the book ballots their first, second, and third choices. Ms. Johnson expected them to form groups based on their book choices.

After making decisions back and forth and with the teacher's help, Sujin was finally in a homogeneous group, reading *Bridge to Terabithia* (Patterson, 1977), with the other three group members, a Mexican American girl, an Indian American boy and a European American boy. They were all struggling with reading though in different ways. They met six times talking about the book, twice a week most of the time, plus one pre-meeting on the schedule of

tasks and one after-meeting for their presentation of the book to the whole class. The first meeting was free discussion about the beginning of the book, without role sheets or any other structures. From the second to the beginning of their fifth meetings, discussions were based on role sheets. The participants took turns to take different roles of query, define, record and chart, and the query was the leader. During the fifth and sixth meetings, discussions were mainly around what they jotted down on their four post-it notes of prediction, question, judgment and connection, which Ms. Johnson gave them after observing many groups had just read from their role sheets and did not really discuss the book. All these discussions were audio-taped and analyzed.

Data sources for this study included detailed field notes from the daily reading sessions in the classroom throughout a semester, transcripts of a three-tier series (beginning, middle, and end) of in-depth interviews with the participant (Seidman, 1998), and various documents including transcripts of the participant's reading/literature discussions and the participant's literacy portfolio. Triangulation was thus assured through the large and varied volume of data sources.

Data analysis was based on an inductive, naturalistic method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). During the analysis, the researcher read and re-read the data and looked for patterns and themes across all data. The procedure was open coding, an unrestricted coding of the data (Strauss, 1987). This inductive process allowed for themes to emerge and for participant's voice to be heard, thus presenting the participant's perceptions in the most forthright manner (Berg, 2001).

Results and Conclusions

Three types of social interactions were observed in the class: whole class literature discussions, heterogeneous small group discussions, and homogeneous small group/literature circle discussions. Interactions in the whole class format were mainly based on the teacher's questions and facilitated by the teacher. In heterogeneous groups, Sujin talked about the book The Prince and the Pauper (Twain, 1881/2000) with her group

members, who had different reading ability levels, based on the questions from the teacher and from group members. In the homogeneous group, Sujin, with other three struggling readers chose the book Bridge to Terabithia (Patterson, 1977) to do the literature circle activity. Three subcategories are presented across these three types of social interactions: level of participation, content of talk and function of talk.

Level of Participation

The table below shows how frequently Sujin took turns in the discussions. Sujin never talked in the whole class discussions. She did not want to speak in front of the class because she thought her classmates would not understand her and would laugh at her. When students were discussing, she listened very attentively, smiling sometimes. In heterogeneous small group discussions, Sujin only talked once and that was a simple response- "yeah"- with a very low voice. Her group members invited her three times to speak per meeting, but she did not say anything, hesitating and shy.

In the homogeneous literature circle activity, Sujin demonstrated great progress. Reading the same book with other students, she found she was not a bad reader; she could even help others. Becoming confident, Sujin started to initiate conversations at the beginning of their fourth meeting. She thus changed from an outsider, to less capable peer in need of help, to capable peer, and more capable peer. Among the 256 turn takings per meeting, she took 25 turns in the discussions, though still far below the average number among the four group members. She was asked to participate 11 times throughout the six meetings, and only twice she did not respond.

Sometimes, even though she did not speak, she used

Turn-taking Frequency for Sujin

Types of Interactions	Frequency of turn taking	Average	Percentage
Whole class	0 (throughout the semester)	16	NA
Heterogeneous group	1 (per meeting)	19	1% (of five students)
Homogeneous group	25 (per meeting)	64	10% (of four students)

• Reading session period: 40 minutes

paralinguistic strategies, such as smiling, nodding, or shaking head.

The results of this study reveal that among the different types of social interactions produced in the class, small group literature circle discussions with role sheets where the group members were all struggling readers though from different cultural backgrounds encouraged the participant to participate most. The next most effective social interaction was heterogeneous small groups where the participant was in different groups with various reading levels, and the whole class discussions revealed the participant to be the least participatory.

Content of Talk

Sujin never participated in the whole class discussions. In heterogeneous group discussions, Sujin started to talk, though she only talked once, and that was an agreement:

John: Because he knew the guy had to kill him, so he might want to save a lot of people, because we were nothing empty(?).

Sujin: Yeah.

In homogeneous group literature circle discussions, Sujin had more opportunities to talk and participated in the discussions. She talked about the book, her reading process, and group routines. The following are examples of Sujin's responses in literature circles. Sujin talked about the book with her group members.

- Sujin made connections. When they were talking about the differences Leslie experienced in the new school, Sujin made connections to her own experience:

Sujin: um, like here...they...they fight too much.

R: They fight too much?

Sujin: they ...well, I can't (in a lower voice)...argue. (4/11/05, 2nd Discussion, p.3)

- Sujin made predictions. After Leslie died, she predicted:

"I think the Leslie's family want to move to Washington 'cause Leslie is dead." (4/25/05, 5th Discussion, p.11)

- Sujin made judgments. Her judgments were often

different from others. For example, when everyone was focusing on Jess's appearance, she said, "I think he's unusual...because he likes to run." (4/7/05, 1st discussion, p.11) Coming from a different cultural and family background, Sujin judged Jess' family in her own way: "I think they are um unfriendly, not easy." (4/11/05, 2nd Discussion, p.6)

Sujin also made judgments about the ending of the book:

"I doubt it was a very good ending because Jess was not that sad". (4/28/05, 6th Discussion, p.4)

- Sujin asked questions. When they were talking about Leslie's death, she asked: "Where is Leslie's body?" (4/25/05, 5th Discussion, p.3)
- Sujin made inferences. After Leslie went to Church with Jess, Sujin did not think Leslie would not keep going to church. She inferred, though the inference might not be reasonable: "I think no because her parents want her to stay with them. [They moved here] because her parents want to spend more time with her." (4/21/05, 4th Discussion, p.4)
- Sujin provided facts. When Akash was predicting what Maybell was going to do, Sujin provided facts from the text to support his prediction:

Akash: And Maybell is going to tell everyone about Terabithia.

Sujin: Because...Mybell was just like that...like to talk. (4/21/05, 4th Discussion, p.5)

- Sujin provided definitions: "From the word "decent", it means "proper" and "respectable". (4/21/05, 4th Discussion, p.1)

Sujin discussed her reading process in the discussions. She talked about her confusions during reading: "I felt it's confusing...'cause he has too many...he has too many sisters". (4/7/05, 1st discussion, p.9)

Sujin sometimes talked about group routines. For example, during the discussion, she asked, "How many pages were we supposed to read?" (4/25/05, 5th Discussion, p.3) When they talked about the tasks for the next time, most of the time, however, Sujin just listened and did whatever she was told to do.

Function of Talk

Sujin did not participate in the whole class discussions. In heterogeneous group discussions, Sujin only talked once. Her talk was non-facilitative, not facilitative or constructive. Sujin agreed with others:

John: Because he knew the guy had to kill him, so he might want to save a lot of people, because we were nothing empty(?).

Sujin: Yeah. (2/2/05 Discussion, p.3)

In homogeneous group literature circle discussions, Sujin's talk, however, had a variety of functions: facilitative, constructive, and non-facilitative. Often, her talk elicited response or further discussion. The following are examples of some types of Sujin's talk.

- Sujin facilitated others' talk by initiating or sustaining a topic:

"So what do you think now about the author?" (4/18/05, 3rd Discussion, p.2)

- Sujin facilitated others' talk by asking questions, for example "Will Moybell be a good queen?" (4/28/05, 6th Discussion, p.3)
- Sujin never commanded others' talk or made requests

Sujin constructed meaning with her group members. She wondered with them, elaborated on their ideas, and challenged their opinions.

- Sujin wondered with her group members: "...And the second one is 'teots', but I don't know what the meaning is." (4/21/05, 4th Discussion, p.1)
- Sujin also elaborated on others' ideas:

Akosh: And Moybell is going to tell everyone about Terobithio.

Sujin: Because...Moybell was just like that...like to talk. (4/21/05, 4th Discussion, p.5)

- Sujin challenged others' opinions:

Andrew: Do you think Leslie will keep going to church or not?

Akosh: Well, I think yes because she was a believer like Jess. ///

Andrew: I think she probably will because she said that she will do when she was there. And Jess was supportive.

Sujin: I think no because her parents want her to stay with them. [They moved here] because her parents want to spend more time with her.

(4/21/05, 4th Discussion, p.4)

Sometimes Sujin's talk was non-facilitative. Her talk did not elicit response or further discussion. The following are some examples.

- Sujin recited tasks from role sheets: "From the word 'decent', it means 'proper' and 'respectable'". (4/21/05, 4th Discussion, p.1)

- Sujin answered others' questions:

Andrew: Why do you think Jess and Moybell go to Terobithio?

Akosh: So she could be there more about how...well, she went out again twice there to Terobithio.

Andrew: No, like...When you said that they remember about being the queen, the queen...

Akosh: Oh...

Sujin: Maybe he felt sorry for her. (4/28/05, 6th Discussion, p.3)

- Sujin agreed with others:

Andrew: Others teased her. And probably she would defend.

Sujin: Yes. (4/7/05, 1st Discussion, p.6)

- Sujin confirmed others' statements. After Akosh expressed his interest in the cow, Sujin said: "It's...it's cool." (4/7/05, 1st Discussion, p.2)
- Sujin never ignored the preceding talk of her group members.

Upon reflection, I noticed that Sujin started to participate in discussions in heterogeneous groups. In homogeneous group literature circle discussions, Sujin changed from an outsider to an active participant and had a variety of responses. In whole class discussions, she was unable to show how much she engaged with a text and others' ideas.

Perceptions and Impacts of Social Interactions about Reading and Text

Perceptions of Social Interactions

As for the discussions in class, Sujin thought they were "just weird" (Sujin, Interview, 3/24/05, Ln.15). She explained that "Here [students] are brave. They talk to teachers and argue" (Ln. 5), which was very different from the school culture in Korea. She thought students here were "noisy" (Ln. 13) and not very respectful to the teacher. She did not like the discussions "because...they...say something I don't know...they say some vocabulary I don't understand" (Ln.123-125). She felt it was difficult to participate in their discussions: "I wish they can speak Korean...I often...talk more...a lot when I was in Korea". (Ln. 132-134)

Sujin liked the heterogeneous small group discussions more, saying "interesting... it's fun." (Sujin, Interview, 3/24/05, Ln.231) Her group members gave her opportunity to talk and she felt good. But she did not think she learned anything from the discussions: "they just talked" (Ln.309). Still she seldom participated because "I sometimes don't understand...their vocabulary." (Ln.259-260)

Sujin liked the homogeneous small group literature circle discussions most. She said the literature circle discussions helped her better understand the book because she learned from others what she could not understand while reading the book. She learned the meanings of some vocabulary and sentences. Also, different opinions from her group members helped her understand what happened in the book.

The discussion also helped Sujin remember more, especially the details. Her group members brought up the details that she had not paid much attention to. These details helped her long-term memory. Also, when she was reading, she had to finish the assignments, which helped her to remember, too.

As for the discussion formats, she did not like the discussion based on the questions the teacher gave them. The role sheets were fine, but it took a long time to finish. She liked the post-it notes, and she said she would use it in her future

reading. She thought this format helped her remember what she read.

Impacts of Social Interactions

The social interactions associated with reading and text, especially the homogeneous small group literature circle discussions impacted several aspects of Sujin's reading. They impacted her view of reading. Before the homogeneous small group literature circle discussions, reading was kind of hard for her; but after the literature circle activity, she felt reading was kind of easy. When the teacher asked a question about what she had read, unlike before always seeking an answer, she became more confident in reading.

Social interactions about reading and text also impacted her book choice. Before the literature circle discussions, she always looked at the first page to decide whether to read or not. Then at the end of the semester, she chose a book by "looking at book cover or friend's recommendation" (Sujin, "Reading Survey II", Portfolio).

Another aspect of her reading that was impacted was her view of herself as a reader or non-reader. Before the literature circle activity, Sujin thought she was a poor English reader, though she believed she was a good reader in Korean. During the literature circle discussions, she found she was not a bad reader because she could remember and understand what American students could not. Also, she could answer their questions. These experiences dramatically changed her view of herself as a reader. So after the literature circle discussions, both her friends and she thought she was an ok reader. She thought she could understand almost everything she read. She started to read more books and tell her friends what she read sometimes.

The fourth impact is that the social interactions impacted Sujin's participation in group discussions. Before the literature circle discussions, Sujin rarely talked about her ideas in a group. During and after the literature circle activity, she was not afraid of telling others her opinions anymore. She knew she could learn from others and could help others.

The fifth impact is her opinion on how to become a good

reader. Before the literature circle discussions, she thought a good reader read fast. To become a good reader one had to read more and read lots of books. After the literature circle activity, she thought to become a good reader one had to know reading skills and lots of words. She started to realize the importance of reading skills.

Finally, as to why people read, before the literature circle discussions, Sujin answered, "because they can get knowledge, find interesting things around the world...[and] sometimes they have imagination". (Sujin, Interview, 3/24/05, Lns.239-243) She added, "Because book is good for spend the time and interesting". (Sujin, "Reading Survey I", Portfolio) After the literature circle discussions, she wrote "you can get knowledge, common sense, imagination, how to write, and vocabularies". (Sujin, Reading Survey 5/11/05, portfolio) Sujin demonstrated a mixture of stances, both efferent and aesthetic.

Implications

Findings suggest that given authentic opportunities to discuss literature, the participants "opened up" and they gained voice and responsibility in literature circle discussions. The social needs to be validated. Struggling readers especially English Language Learners need to be re-evaluated. In addition, "struggling" may not be as limiting as teachers may perceive and it does not have to mean lack of enjoyment. English language learners must be given opportunities to work with peers and have group processes scaffolded. Several implications can be drawn from this study. For teachers and schools, one implication is that social interactions about reading and text, especially small group discussions, are significant for students and perhaps especially with struggling readers and English language learners. Teachers can also draw implications about how to implement small group social interactions in reading instruction, how to group students, what kind of discussion tasks are better to be used with students, understanding the cultural differences of those involved in social interactions, and reconsidering their definitions of "struggling" readers.

For teacher preparation programs, pre-service teachers should get prepared philosophically and practically. They need to know the meaning and importance of social interactions in the process of learning to read, and also they need to know the "how-tos" of instructional strategies that promote social interactions, like literature circles. For parents/guardians, it is always helpful if parents/guardians talk frequently with their children, asking deeper questions, sharing their opinions, and listening to their children's answers.

References

- [1]. Allington, R.L. (2002). Foreword. In J. P. Day, D.L. Spiegel, J. McCellan, & V.B. Brown, *Moving forward with literature circle: How to plan, manage, and evaluate literature circles to deepen understanding and foster a love of reading (theory and practice)*. New York: Scholastic.
- [2]. Almasi, J. F., O'Flahavan, J. F., & Arya, P. (2001). A comparative analysis of student and teacher development in more and less proficient discussions of literature. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 36(2), 96-120.
- [3]. Alvermann, D. E. (1996). Peer-led discussions: Whose interests are served? *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 39, 282-289.
- [4]. Berg, B. L. (2001). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- [5]. Carrison, C., & Ernst-Slavitt, G. (2005). From silence to a whisper to active participation: Using literature circles with ELL students. *Reading Horizons*, 46 (2), 93-113.
- [6]. Cazden, C. B. (1986). Classroom discourse. In M.C. Wittrock (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching* (3rd ed.). (pp.432-463). New York: Macmillan.
- [7]. Commeyras, M. & Sumner, G. (1998). Literature questions children want to discuss: What teachers and students learned in a second grade classroom. *The Elementary School Journal*, 99(2), 129-152.
- [8]. Daniels, H. (1994/2002). *Literature circles, voice and choice in book clubs & reading groups*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.
- [9]. Dixon-Krauss, L. (1996). Vygotsky's socio-historical

perspective on learning and its application to western literacy instruction. In L. Dixon-Krauss (Ed.), *Vygotsky in the classroom: Mediated literacy instruction and assessment* (pp. 7-24). White Plains, NY: Longman.

[10]. Evans, K.S., Alverman, D., & Anders, P.L. (1998). Literature discussion groups: An examination of gender roles. *Reading Research and Instruction*, 37 (2), 107-122.

[11]. Fountas, I.C. & Pinnell, G. S. (2001). *Guiding readers and writers grades 4-6: Teaching comprehension, genre, and content literacy*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

[12]. Gambrell, L.B., Mazzone, S.A., & Almasi, J.F. (2000). Promoting collaboration, social interaction, and engagement with text. In L. Boker, M. J. Dreher, & J. T. Guthrie (Eds.), *Engaging young readers: Promoting achievement and motivation* (pp. 119-139). New York: Guilford Press.

[14]. Glesne, C. (1999). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction* (2nd ed.). New York: Addison Wesley Longman.

[15]. Guthrie, J. T. (1996). Educational contexts for engagement in literacy. *The Reading Teacher*, 49 (6), 432-445.

[16]. Hill, B. C., Schlick Noe, K. L. S., & King, J. A. (2003). *Literature circles in middle school: One teacher's journey*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon Publishers, Inc.

[17]. Johnson, H. (1997). *Reading the personal and the political: Exploring female representation in realistic fiction with adolescent girls*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona.

[18]. Johnson, H. (2000). "To stand up and say something": "Girls Only" literature circles at the middle level. *New Advocate*, 13(4), 375-389.

[19]. Jordan, C. (1995). Creating cultures of schooling: Historical and conceptual background of the KEEP/Rough Rock collaboration. *The Bilingual Research Journal*, 19(1), 83-100.

[20]. Krashen, S. (1993). *The power of reading*. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, Inc.

[21]. Lee, C. D., & Smagorinsky, P. (Eds.). (2000). *Vygotskian perspectives on literacy research:*

Constructing meaning through collaborative inquiry. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

[22]. Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

[23]. Macgillivray, L. (1995). Second language and literacy teachers considering literature circles. A play. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 39 (1): 36-44.

[24]. Martinez, C. M. (2000). Bilingual students' responses to multicultural children's literature on discrimination. *The Dragon Load*, 18 (2), 17-23.

[25]. Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Boss Publishers.

[26]. Paterson, K. (1977). *Bridge to Terabithia*. New York: HarperTrophy.

[27]. Peregoy, S. F., & Boyle, O. (2001). *Reading, writing, & learning in ESL: A resource book for K-12 teachers* (3rd ed.). New York: Longman.

[28]. Roller, C. M., & Beed, P.L. (1994). Sometimes the conversations were good, and sometimes....*Language Arts*, 71, 509-515.

[29]. Rosenblatt, L. (1978). *The reader, the text, the poem: The transactional theory of the literary work*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

[30]. Schlick Noe, K. L., & Johnson, N. J. (1999). *Getting Started with Literature Circles*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon Publishers, Inc.

[31]. Seidman, I. (1998). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences* (2nd ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.

[32]. Short, K. G. (1992). Intertextuality: Searching for patterns that connect. In C. K. Kinzer, & D. J. Leu (Eds.), *Literacy research, theory, and practice: Views from many perspectives: 41st Yearbook of The National Reading Conference* (pp. 187-197). Chicago: The National Reading Conference, Inc.

[33]. Short, K., Harste, J., & Burke, C. (1996). *Creating classrooms for authors and inquiries* (2nd ed.). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

[34]. Short, K., & Klassen, C. (1993). Literature circles:

CASE STUDY

Hearing children's voices. In B. Cullinan (Ed.), *Children's voices: Talk in the classroom* (pp. 66-85). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

[35]. Strauss, A. L. (1987). *Qualitative analysis for social scientists*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

[36]. Twain, M. (2000). *The prince and the pauper*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc. (Original work published in 1881).

[37]. Vacca, R. T., & Vacca, J. (1999). *Content area*

reading. New York: Longman.

[38]. Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

[39]. Vygotsky, L. S. (1986). *Thought and language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

[40]. Wink, J., & Putney, L. (2002). *A vision of Vygotsky*. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Xiufang Chen, PhD, is currently an Assistant Professor of Reading in the College of Education at Rowan University in Glassboro, New Jersey. Courses she taught include reading and the middle level students, teaching literacy, differentiated literacy instruction, literacy foundations, and children's literature. Her current research interests include sociocultural dimensions of literacy, struggling adolescent readers, integration of technology (and movement) for literacy instruction, and alternative assessment. She has presented at various international, national and regional conferences in the field of literacy education.

